Deceleration through the imprint

Deceleration through the imprint: Photo/graphic interactions in contemporary art

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Abstract

Art historian David Joselit has recently argued that the task of art today is resist 'the allure' of information's 'transparency'. This places a specific emphasis on photographic images. The ease of their production and ubiquity of use – as a crucial element in economic, social and cultural acceleration processes tied to information – has increased the implicit transparency that has arguably been one of photography's most prominent attributes. The article suggests that printmaking can provide valuable procedural, aesthetic and conceptual means in the questioning of the photographic image's assumed transparency that thereby contribute to the image's criticality.

Drawing on the concept of the 'imprint' – as developed by the French art historian Georges Didi-Huberman in a still untranslated study – the article undertakes an analysis of a specific mode of contemporary printmaking, namely the woodcut. It is proposed that the distinctive material methods developed by the two chosen artists, Brook Andrew and Christiane Baumgartner, present a unique manifestation of the imprint that result in a process of slowing down the viewer's apperception. Concurrently – and closely related to the artists' thematic concerns – they can generate an enquiry of photography's transparency and thus enhance its socio-cultural potential of critique.

Keywords

Brook Andrew and Christiane Baumgartner; criticality of the photographic image; imprint (Georges Didi-Huberman's *empreinte*); contact in prints and photographs; 'plasticity' of the photograph/image; deceleration through art; woodcuts as imprints

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Please note, images are indicative

Tracking photography's plasticity – the potential of printmaking

In a recent volume of the journal *October* dedicated to photography, the art historian David Joselit observed '… we might be entering a moment when the very purpose of art is to slow things down; to afford friction; to *refuse easy translation into information*' (168). He further emphasised that the issue for art was not to 'forego engaging with information', but rather 'to resist the allure of its *transparency* in favour of tracking its *plasticity* – in other words, the shapes of social governance and aesthetic speculation that its myriad overlapping channels assume' (*ibid*). [Italics in original.]

'Slowing things down' or 'deceleration' have become catchphrases in contemporary culture, including art.[1] This is especially pertinent to photographic images, whose presence – due to the ease of their production and ubiquity of use – can be regarded as a crucial element in economic, social and cultural acceleration processes tied to information, chiefly in its technologised form. For the purpose of this essay it would therefore appear permissible to substitute 'photography' for 'information' in Joselit's account. More specifically, it has been argued that the pervasive trope of the photograph's transparency – its status as transcription rather than construction – is enhanced by digital technologies. Lucy Soutter has spoken of a 'deep drive to deny process … sustaining the fantasy of the pure image' in photography from modernism to

recent digital work. She argues that 'artistic labour is even more repressed [in contemporary work] than in traditional silver prints' (94-95).

Given this situation, the 'tracking' of a photograph's 'plasticity' can become an artistic methodology to counteract information's (and photography's) assumed and augmented transparency. Joselit's 'plasticity', the intersecting social, economic, technological, cultural and, indeed, aesthetic trajectories and manifestations of information/photography, can be understood in two ways: in terms of malleability defined by multiplicity and speed, as theorised by Hito Steyerl (2012), for example. Additionally, and not unconnected to the first possibility, the elasticity implied by the term 'plasticity' can be interpreted as a material quality. (Interestingly, 'Plastik' in German and 'plastique' in French, from the Greek 'plastein' 'to mould', are the generic terms for sculpture.) This material aspect or the 'plasticity' of photography has been echoed in recent years by various authors, such as Charlotte Cotton (29-33) and Matthew S Witkovsky (7-18). In her keynote speech at the 2012 Helsinki *Photomedia* conference Cotton observed that photographers are 'consciously meditating on photography's objecthood and physical presence in an era where our common relationship with photography is screen-based and social' (32). In the 2016 issue of *October* dedicated to photography, Witkovsky argued – from the perspective of art history and theory – that 'insufficient attention' … 'has been paid to photographs – rather than photography at large – as objects of formal and theoretical inquiry' (7). Notwithstanding critical writing on the materiality of the photograph since the 1990s by Elizabeth Edwards and Geoffrey Batchen amongst others, contemporary photographers are indeed finding multiple and varied means of interrogating the medium

along those lines. The 2014 exhibition *What is a Photograph*, at the International Center for Photography in New York, curated and with a catalogue edited by Carol Squiers, is but one example.[2] The exhibition focused on photographs as material things, as 'something to be looked at, not through'; it highlighted 'what the photograph *is*', rather than the more usual emphasis on what it is *of*, or its representational realism (Batchen "Photography" 47). The show brought together artists who 'probe the structuring properties of photography itself' (Squiers 9). As well as including an engagement with the digital, many photographers follow an archaeological impulse by going back 'to the medium's origins, physically and conceptually, but also historically' (Batchen "Photography" 51). At stake in this process is a conception of art photography which – despite or because of the predominance of semiotic debates of the 1970s and 80s and the impact of conceptual art's probing – has tended to ignore the rather more 'protean history of photography' (Squiers 10), or what Witkowsky calls its 'bastard history', its 'longstanding interdependence with books and print culture, theatre, film, and certainly painting' (7).[3]

Whether the disavowal of print in photographic discourse is – at least in part – responsible for the fact that printmaking seems to be off the radar for most artists, who primarily practice photography today, is a moot point.[4] This is in contrast to artists who focus chiefly on printmaking. For them photography, or photographs, are vital as source material.[5] The prevalence of photographs in such artists' work does not, however, necessarily entail a conscious reflection on photography in the manner suggested above. Photography's role in visual culture is often merely taken as a given. A prominent

example of an artist who did engage with both photography and printmaking – and their intersection – in a highly critical fashion is Richard Hamilton, as demonstrated by Fanny Singer in her discussion of Hamilton's print *The annunciation* (2005).

Like Hamilton's, the works of the two artists I will discuss can also be argued to engage critically with the role of photographic images. In focusing on a multimedia artist frequently working with photographs and printmaking, Brook Andrew, and a printmaker who employs camera-based images, Christiane Baumgartner, I aim to investigate some aspects of the interrelationship between photography and printmaking in artistic endeavours, and between the print and the photograph in today's culture. I will argue that printmaking can be seen as a rich modus of practice in a material interrogation of photography, with the aim of achieving the slowing down of which Joselit speaks. This deceleration entails both the process of production by the artist as well as the process of apperception by the viewer. In particular, I wish to demonstrate the specific contribution that printmaking can make in achieving the photograph's material 'plasticity' in order to question its assumed transparency and thus its 'easy translation into information', in Joselit's phrase (168). If some recent photographers have tended to emphasise '*what the photograph is*', rather than '*what it is of*', my inquiry will show that the deployment of print can thematise *both*.[6]

Contrary to initial fears of obsolescence in both artistic fields generated by the predominance of the digital, artists and critics now regard photography and printmaking – especially in their analogue form – as providing precisely the means to question today's image flood and the role of the image itself; to constitute and in turn prompt a slowing

down, as Joselit demands, in order to enhance the photograph's potential for a critical reception. The images' materials, processes, techniques and object-character are considered to be vital in this role.

It should be stressed that such close material attention to either photography or print is not intended to serve the purpose to essentialise either as a fixed and immutable medium or discipline.

The notion of the imprint in relation to photography and print

I will pay close attention to the works of both artists by following a model of 'materialist formalism' (Witkowsky) and attend to their material and aesthetic conditions, their process, iconography and the cultural references marshalled thereby.

Of particular relevance will be the concept of the *empreinte* by French art historian Georges Didi-Huberman ("La Ressemblance"). The term can be translated as *impression* or *imprint*.[7] Didi-Huberman's study (2008), titled *La Ressemblance par Contact, Archéologie, Anachronisme et Modernité de l'Empreinte* [*Resemblance through Contact, Archaeology, Anachronism and Modernity of the Imprint*] elaborates on several transfer and imprinting processes and mentions photography and printmaking. However, it focuses primarily on the cast object in archaeology, science and art history, from the Renaissance to the 20th century, with particular emphasis on Duchamp.[8]

As the title *La Ressemblance par Contact* [*Resemblance through contact*] indicates, Didi-Huberman's concept of the *imprint* ["empreinte"] is premised on direct contact or touch, such as the marks produced by the foot in the sand. It may also be applied to the contact

between a mould and its cast, as in bronze casting or other such processes.[9] It should be noted here that Didi-Huberman's conception of the imprint does not fetishise contact or touch. Quite the contrary, it serves to problematise any simplistic, overt or tacit reification – or its opposite, negation – of notions that may be implied by direct touch or contact and thus adhere to the imprint, such as originality, authenticity, presence. In fact Didi-Huberman stresses the complex process that any imprinting entails and consequently any dialectical connotations that attach themselves to the resulting object:

> is the process of the *empreinte* one of *contact with an origin* or one of *loss of origin*? Does it demonstrate the authenticity of presence (as in direct physical contact) or does it, on the contrary, demonstrate a loss of uniqueness contingent on the possibility of its reproduction? Does it generate uniqueness or mass production? Is it characterised by having an aura or by being one of a series? Resemblance or dissimilarity? Identity or anonymity? … Does it possess form or is it formless? Is it the same or different? Familiar or strange? Does it entail contact or distance?... I would say that an *empreinte* is a 'dialectical image', an explosion of all the above: something that is as related to *contact* (a foot sinking into the sand) as it is to *loss* (the absence of the foot in its impression); it is as related to contact with loss as it is to loss of contact. (Didi-Huberman in Pelzer-Montada, n.p.)[10]

As indicated here, Didi-Huberman's attribution of loss, of separation, of absence as inherent to the imprint are matched by its potential as presence, as authenticity – both caused by physical contact. There is further profound ambivalence, even confusion – he

speaks of the doubling, the negativity, the 'split' – that any imprint involves and that is connected to its capacity for reproducibility ("Ähnlichkeit und Berührung" 41). Moreover, we can never know for sure what the 'original' of the imprint was; whether what we see corresponds to it, as we can never be absolutely sure what happened in the transfer process ("Ähnlichkeit und Berührung" 18). The specific nature of the contact remains hidden. Hence the imprint's presence and authenticity are accompanied by the possibility for 'fiction, deception, montage, exchangeability' ("Ähnlichkeit und Berührung" 42 and 191). Despite their differences, photography and print share in this feature of the imprint, namely that 'the active centre of the technical process remains hidden' ("Ähnlichkeit und Berührung" 19).

The dialectical nature of the imprint – the 'explosion' of associations, as outlined in the quote above, that are often considered to be binary oppositions – results in a profound 'unease within representation' (Didi-Huberman "Ähnlichkeit und Berührung" 190). The latter is comparable to Joselit's 'friction' and can be regarded as the imprint's critical promise today.

The notion of the imprint in relation to photography inevitably brings up the much-debated concept of the index. Generally, Didi-Huberman credits the index within art with the ability or the force, 'to think the question of meaning (the semantic) together with the question of the senses (the phenomenological and sensory, the somatic)' ("Ähnlichkeit und Berührung" 117). Yet, in his critique of the art historical debate of the indexical elements of Duchamp's work in terms of a photographic model, he implies that this approach seems to be motivated by a desire to purify the art object from materiality, to

conceive of it as an object only conducted by light (118/19). Here, his view corresponds to the critiques of photography theorists mentioned earlier who have noted the disregard of photography's materiality in earlier debates.

Leaving aside the often heated and controversial debates about the photograph's status as an index, as the well as the changes to it brought about by the advent of the digital,[11] it is agreed that the photograph and the print share an indexical quality, or in José Roca's words: 'printmaking shares photography's status as index of a physical referent'. But, crucially, 'an imprint acquires its indexical quality by contiguity: one physical surface is in contact with another' ("Graphic Unconscious" 26). In other words, unlike the photograph, whose indexical quality was famously described by Barthes as 'an emanation from the referent', analogue print is premised on the direct material contact of the imprint (80). (As indicated earlier, the question of how the digital affects the notion of the imprint awaits closer investigation.) Although the 'emanation from the referent' has been frequently discussed as a form of contact in photographic discourse,[12] Didi-Huberman's conception of the imprint emphasises the direct, physical convergence of two material surfaces. Hence, it is weighed unambiguously towards perceptibly tangible matter. The typical printmaking process is the bringing together of a matrix – be it an autographic or photographic inscription on a plate, stone or screen – with a substrate. This occurs through the process of impressing the matrix onto the substrate – customarily paper, but potentially other materials too – generally by means of a printing press. However, not all printing techniques do require the latter, as will be shown later.

Today, the situation is complicated in that (almost all) print processes incorporate photomechanical and -chemical processes. Hence, instead of the artist drawing onto the block, plate or stone, an initial drawing may be transferred or imprinted directly onto the plate (as in photoetching), stone (photolithography) or screen (screen printing) by such technological means.[13] Instead of the transfer of an autographic source image, this transmission or imprinting may entail the photomechanical and -chemical transfer of a photographic image itself (whether analogue or digital does not matter). However, the ensuing processes differ. While photoetching, photolithography and screen printing permit a direct printing of the transferred photographic image, the same photomechanical transfer onto a piece of wood still requires to be cut into the wood.[14] I shall return to this point in a moment.

The aforementioned printmaking processes – which are in no way as easy to execute as they appear in this brief summary – can be said to add material 'density' to the photographic image that is obtained by means of them. Most importantly, they impart the direct physical contact implied by the imprint to the photographic image. Specific material qualities of the print can then be regarded as signifiers of its character as an imprint. Chiefly, these may result from the printing on different weights and textures of paper (e.g. *Somerset 280g/m^2 Buff Velvet* versus *Arches 88 320g/m^2*) and the smooth density of inks. As imprints, these processes can be argued to question the characteristic transparency of the photographic image. The latter is typically connoted by its representational codes and its content – or what it is of – as well as its material 'make-up'; habitually, a certain type, weight, texture and surface of paper. The latter is

exemplified by an evenly distributed chemical coating that results in a smooth, seamless surface. These signifiers mark a conventional photographic image out as different from the more 'crafted' look and subtle material specificities of one that is created by a printmaking process. Needless to say, the difference may be difficult, even impossible to detect in a reproduction. It may only be apparent when the image is viewed *in situ*; when – in addition to the enhanced sensory qualities of the artistic object – the parameters of time and space are factored in.

For the purpose of the discussion, I wish to focus on a specific form of printmaking, namely the woodcut. The resurgent popularity of this oldest printmaking technique since the 1990s – as of printmaking in general – has been attributed, by authors such as Ernst Rebel, to the interest of artists in deceleration or a slowing down in the production and viewing of art (144-8).

I will contend that the manually produced woodcut has the potential to enhance the nature of the imprint in a way that purely photomechanical transfers do not. In other words, the imprint that constitutes such a work, and with it the qualities of the imprint, as outlined by Didi-Huberman, are heightened in such work. Both chosen artists' woodcut prints foreground the material, (im)printed nature of the photographic image; hence they can be argued to complicate the transparency of the photographic image, to 'resist its allure', as Joselit says, and thereby enhance its critical potential, namely of emphasising, and even questioning, the photograph's social, economic, cultural and aesthetic entanglements. In both cases, what the photograph *is of* is brought into close correlation

with what *it is*. In this way, the unreflective consumption, that photographs can so easily prompt, is disrupted.

Imprint and labour: The Japanese woodcuts of Brook Andrew

Australian Brook Andrew is a contemporary multimedia artist with an international reputation. Half-aborigine, he is known for his critical examination of the portrayal of indigenous Australians and Australia's colonial past. His work is also shaped by his interest in mainstream popular culture and media.

Two prints from Andrew's series *Danger of Authority* (2009) are the focus of my inquiry. The series as a whole consists of three different modes of printmaking (Fig #). In addition to three screen prints and seven lithographs, it comprises two Japanese *mokuhanga* or woodblock prints (Figs ##). Chiefly, Japanese woodblock uses water-based ink which is put on by brush, as opposed to oil-based ink applied with a roller, as in the West. *Mokuhanga* is printed by hand with the help of a disk-like specialist tool, called the *baren*, onto paper that is purposely made for this type of printing. Papermaking being another highly developed, ancient Japanese craft, the properties of paper made for mokuhanga prints permit the absorption of the water-based inks without buckling. Western woodcuts can also be printed by hand, but tend to be run through a printing press. The practitioners of m*okuhanga* have also developed a large range of specialist cutting tools and techniques to render visual effects. All these factors result in distinct visual-sensorial qualities that are difficult, even impossible, to achieve by other means.[15] The source for Andrew's project are pages from lifestyle journals of the 1950s. Andrew found these in

New York flea markets during a six month ISCP (International Studio and Curatorial Program) Australia Council Residency in the city in 2008/2009 (Rawlings, 110).[16]

The faded halftone images show extravagant and expensively decorated interiors, some of them historical. Imitating a montage effect, a cutout of a contemporary headline, taken from the *New York Times*, is centrally superimposed on to each image. Some of these headlines are immediately familiar ('Peacekeepers in Somalia Are Killed by Islamists'), others more ambiguous ('Even a Failing Mind Feels the Tug of History'). Such attention-grabbing phrases clash with the underlying depiction of lavish and immaculate wealth, denoting status, success and power. Visually, the cutout and pasted-on newspaper headline introduces an incongruity into the source image that reinforces the idea of jarring values and conflicting social and political worlds: the outdated historical interiors combine with contemporary headlines to assert that the power structures and economic, political and social systems, that underpin the visual affluence of the past, persist to this day. In this way, the images metonymically connect two historically distinct references, namely the originators of the displayed wealth with contemporary conflict. The straplines expressly point to the social and political costs of such systems. The artist's collaborator, Trent Walter, has described the relationship between text and image as a 'relationship of conflict and power in an international context, and the implied dislocation between those responsible for the conflict and those who are the victims of it' (Brook and Walter 3).

By re-presenting mass media images in unusual formats and in three different sizes, all larger than the original journal page, and by heightening the aesthetic qualities of the

mundane source images through the different printing techniques, Andrew draws the viewer's attention to the process by which these works were created.

For the two mokuhanga prints, the artist commissioned Japanese master blockcutter and printer Shoichi Kitamura to translate the magazine images into woodblock. In delegating the execution of the work to a specialist, Andrew followed a trend common in artistic production today: the artist becomes a producer, in the sense of having a directive, managerial function. The British art historian John Roberts has conceptualised the changing role of the artist as producer. He terms the artist's activities of selecting, ordering and placing rather than making as a 'deskilling' (88). The work is then made by somebody else, typically a known expert in some technique, a skilled craftsman. The artist then assumes the role of producer, a process that is referred to as 'reskilling' (ibid).[17]

The translation into woodblock of the two journal pages and collaged newspaper headlines introduces an element of craft into a mechanical, mass-produced image. Yet, paradoxically, this crafting of the image appears, at first glance, entirely inconspicuous. On seeing the woodcuts, many viewers are likely to be uncertain as to what kind of image or even print they are looking at.[18] The image looks familiar – after all, who has not seen such lifestyle journals, even dated ones? Reading the caption and learning that the print is a woodcut may increase the confusion, at the same time as arouse fascination. How is it done? And why has the artist gone to the trouble of creating an image that does not even show apparent evidence of how it has been fashioned or the technique that has been employed?

This is not just due to the fact that – as photographic reproductions – the prints are unlike the well-known autographic woodcuts of the German Expressionists which flaunt dramatically crude incisions, or the more current, richly decorative prints in this technique by German artist duo Gert and Uwe Tobias. Neither are they like other recent woodcuts based on photographs – by well-known artists Franz Gertsch or Vija Celmins. Gertsch transposes the intricacy of his photographic source image into tiny 'points' (H B Heier)[19], whereas Celmins adopts finely wrought linear incisions in her frequently reproduced *Ocean Surface* of 1992 (Rippner). Even though it may not be their main intention, the approaches of these two artists could be described in terms of an assertion of authorial mastery *vis-à-vis* photography's 'automatic' perfection. This is accomplished by means of their virtuoso, non-autographic mark-making that 'copies', even competes with the photographic source image.

Andrew's two woodcuts, by contrast, display a range, depth and subtlety of continuous tonal values, that, combined with a razor-sharp precision of outlines, correspond to the visual codes of photography, specifically those that denote its causal relationship to reality. For Siegfried Kracauer photography's specificity lay in 'the mathematical exactness' and 'unimaginable precision' with which the camera rendered the smallest detail; hence its transparency was associated 'with its sharpness' (qtd in Westgeest and Van Gelder 54). The woodcuts mimic the tonality as well as the precision and sharpness of a photographic image, rather than the mottled appearance of the half-tone 'original' (the latter being evident in the screen prints of the series, see Figs ##). At the same time, this typical 'opticality' of the photograph is weighted towards a haptics (or 'plasticity') of

vision, due to the divergence of the woodcut from a photographic print.[20] This may be inferred from the overall 'softer' look and warm tonal range of the image than would be expected in a similar black-and-white photographic print. Size plays a role: While the images (97 x 67 cm) are not large by contemporary tableau-like photographic gallery art, they are large compared to everyday photographic images or magazine pages and do command the viewer's attention. Also, while the image may at first glance, especially from a distance, look *like* a photographic print, closer inspection reveals subtle disparities from such a work. Chiefly, these might be described as a less comprehensive provision of detail than would be the case in a photograph, while maintaining the appearance of photographic exactness, precision and sharpness. Kitamura has elaborated on the different types of printing techniques he applied to achieve some of the sophisticated tonal effects and details.[21] As a result, the viewer's habitual, fleeting encounter with a photograph is jolted. The image not only invites, but demands close looking, literally an inspection of its surface and details. Hence, both the temporal mode (of merely glancing) and the conceptual habitus (of looking 'through' the object at what is represented) of the 'typical' encounter with photographs are interrupted, de-normalised. It is almost impossible to adopt the usual mode of looking *through* the photograph as an object, to focus on what the image *is of*, as an image 'without a code', to evoke once again Barthes's phrase. Being made aware of the artifice of the image, the viewer is forced to acknowledge its fashioning of the real. This in turn can prompt reflection on what the real may be and how it has arrived in its present state. Importantly, by tracing the image's construction, it becomes apparent that what we see in front of us, *is* an imprint. One

becomes aware that something has been fashioned, constructed, assembled that has found its impression in the image in front of us. That something is the image matrix of course, or in this case, the multiple blocks and the impressions derived from them. It is the imprint that puts the viewer into direct contact, as it were, with the labour of the making of the image.

One may argue that any analogue print carries with it the dialectical aspects of the imprint, as explained earlier; however, what differentiates the two Andrew woodcuts even from Gertsch's and Celmins's, is its foregrounding of the imprinted nature in combination with the subject matter. The labour that produced the wealth depicted in the images – and that constitutes the root of the power structures that are hinted at in the headlines – is usually invisible and remains abstract. Here, this labour is experientially, if still largely symbolically, made palpable through the imprint. (It is worth noting that achieving the intricate detail and fine tonal gradation of the original photographic reproductions in the two mokuhanga prints raised considerable challenges, even for such an accomplished craftsman as Kitamura. Pelzer-Montada, 413-16)[22] (Figs ##) In looking at the image – retracing the intricate surface patterning that conveys the material opulence – the usual abstraction of labour becomes tangible – subtly, but inescapably.

Even without the viewer having exact knowledge of the details of the making of this specific woodcut, the authenticity that adheres to the crafting of the image – someone, somewhere has expended time, energy, skill and touch in making every single detail of what the viewer sees – is present. At the same time, as Didi-Huberman has noted,

absence and with it the danger of inauthenticity, of the fake, arise. We cannot actually see some of the labour, or the original of the reproduction that is in front of us.

In addition to the material plasticity of the photographic image, as just described, the works also point to the 'plasticity', the technical and social mobility of the photograph: the collage element marks the image out as one that has changed its function, from an image that serves pleasurable visual consumption (and invites the self-same economic consumption), to a self-consciously critical commentary on these very conditions. One may also add here its further 'remediation' as an art image, deliberately created to incite contemplation and critical reflection.

With their recognisable reference to the media, the prints also remind us of the economic value that the media themselves represent. After all, we not only consume material goods but also, to an ever-increasing degree, the products of media and communication. This 'immaterial labour' of visual and mental consumption, a term coined by sociologist Maurizio Lazzarato (1996), is intricately entwined with 'material labour', as has been shown (132-46). Andrew's explicit re-use of already reproduced media images reminds the viewer of the context in which these associations and affects are most often encountered, but not often registered.

To sum up: while the specific possibilities of mokuhanga are employed in a masterly fashion to evoke the visual tropes of the transparency of the photograph, the material object-character of Andrew's woodblocks counters any suggestion of a facile photographic transparency. Moreover, the woodcut's status as an imprint – with the

connotations of presence and authenticity – immediately produce their opposite, inauthenticity and absence, as Didi-Huberman has argued. Hence, the friction that Joselit speaks of, or the 'unease in representation' (Didi-Huberman "Ähnlichkeit und Berührung" 190) become apparent, even sensorially tangible. The fact that the imprint forces the viewer – as described – to confront, both experientially as well as symbolically, the labour that underlies our actual and visual economy and that is conventionally absent in the photographic image, thus also imparts the criticality of what the photograph *is of* to what *it is*.

(Im)printerly manoeuvres: Christiane Baumgartner's woodcuts

Christiane Baumgartner is an artist who – unusually – has gained an international reputation as a printmaker. Originally trained in Leipzig, Germany, Baumgartner undertook postgraduate studies at the Royal College of Art in London (1997-99). During this time she gave up printmaking and experimented with video. It was only on her return to Leipzig that she took up printmaking again. Lacking the numerous and costly printing materials and equipment, she adopted the much simpler woodcut technique. The latter can be printed without a printing press and requires, at least in Baumgartner's case, nothing more than a knife and a piece of wood (Roca "Interview").

As with Andrew, Baumgartner's prints can be said to exhibit an eye-catching plasticity, which counteracts camera-based images' assumed transparency, while slowing down the act of looking. Also as with Andrew, but in a different way, there is a congruence between the material form of her images and the subject matter, what her images *are* and what

they *are of*. As will be shown, Baumgartner's prints foreground their status as imprints in a striking manner.

Baumgartner's works frequently derive from photographs, or arrested and re-photographed TV or video footage. They often represent mundane and unspectacular scenes, such as aspects of the urbanised landscape – especially the 'non-spaces' (Marc Augé) of motorways and tunnels – or rural landscapes, similarly marked by human intervention (Figs ##). Other than the subject matter, the latter share little of the genre's pictorial traditions. Common to all images is an 'objectivity', neutrality, anti-subjectivity, matter-of-factness.[23] Many thematise stillness as well as movement and speed – the latter contrary to the slowness that characterises their production, with the largest prints taking up to a year to make. Yet the most eye-catching characteristic of Baumgartner's woodcuts is the permeation of the picture surface by horizontal lines. These are suggestive of the 'graphism' of analogue video, although not caused by it (Roca "Interview"). The 'original' photographic image or scene emerges, ostensibly, in spite of this visual 'noise'. But this is only partially so.

The positive-negative relationship that is usually at play in the relief technique of the woodcut literally exposes – throws into relief – the drawn and to-be-printed line or image area by removing the wood around it. (The possibilities for reversal of and play on this convention have been a constant feature of the technique.) As explained earlier, while it is perfectly possible to 'translate' the graded tonal structure of a camera image into woodcut, through a varied texture of either linear or point-like incisions that closely follow the texture of the photographic source, Baumgartner proceeds differently.

The conspicuous and disturbant ‘noise’ of alternating black and white horizontal lines actually constructs the image: the seemingly interfering white lines reveal the scene or image, by doubling as the contouring lines (or field) of the conventional woodcut. Correspondingly, the black lines that conventionally ‘describe’ the subject are also abstracted to horizontal lines, as if released from their descriptive function. Taken together, both types of lines emit the image, albeit obliquely. The material fashioning of the image is thus foregrounded. It is clearly signalled as a construction, as something ‘manufacted‘ by a complex interaction of hand and technical equipment, however simple or sophisticated the latter may be.

At the level of representation, or ‘what the image is of’, Baumgartner’s linear manoeuvres constitute an ostensible complication of, or better interference with, the ‘automatism’ or transparency of the photographic image. As argued, such intrusive ‘meddling’ is relevant in light of the unproblematic realism that still adheres to the camera image, notwithstanding the possibilities of digital manipulation. On the contrary, in its insistence on the constructedness of the image, Baumgartner’s work counters ‘the deep drive to deny process’ or the side-stepping of photography’s material form in favour of the simplistic analogy of a view through a window, as already stated (Soutter 94-5).

As with Andrew’s pieces, the viewer’s physical proximity and/or distance to the work is critical. If Andrew’s woodcuts on close inspection reveal the subtle differences from a photographic image that a more distant view suggests, Baumgartner’s prints – viewed close-up – disintegrate into a mere agglomeration of lines that create a confounding mirage. Thus, they are not stable enough to allow the image to manifest unambiguously

for the viewer. (Reproductions of a Baumgartner print give a false impression of stability that is not present when viewing the work *in situ*.) The image that is presented by the material picture – that is, what it is of, what it represents – can only be ascertained by the viewer through active participation. He/she has to move away from the image into the space of the gallery; has to find the right physical 'spot' at which the image solidifies. In the bodily spatial movement to and from the print, the conventional act of looking is literally slowed down and hence defamiliarised. At the same time, it is made palpable as an embodied activity. In this way, the encounter with the image defies not only the photographic moment as the time congealed in the surface of the object, but also the brevity with which images – photographic images in particular – are encountered on a day-to-day level.

A further riff on these themes is Baumgartner's serial presentation – with only marginally differentiated individual images – of her preferred subject matter of moving vehicles (see *Lisbon I-IV*, 2001; *Schkeuditz I-IV*, 2005; *Solaris I-IV*, 2008) or the recording of speed through the visual trope of blurredness (*Fahrt II*, 2004). A series such as *1 Sekunde (One Second*), 2005, which turns one second of video footage into twenty-five constituent woodcuts, can be seen both as a brilliant demonstration as well as a reversal of the compression of time and the specific technology to record it (Figs ##). One second – itself a historically generated unit of time – can conventionally just be experienced, with the help of the specialised technology of a clock or watch. It can also variously be represented by different image technologies, such as a photographic or video camera, each yielding different experiences. Here, the conventionality of either of these two technologies, the

'flash' (or 'moment') of the photographic image, the duration of the 'moving' image frame, are exposed in their fabricated or 'plastic' nature with almost surgical precision. At the same time, as explained, they allow – or prompt – the viewer to slow down and retrieve precisely an element of time that is usually lost in speed, one that can only be felt through deliberate attention. With regard to *1 Sekunde*, the physical passage of looking occurs laterally, from one print to the next, in addition to the viewer moving between distance and proximity – towards and away from the image, as explained earlier.

Although it may appear counter-intuitive at first glance – due to the abstract quality of the images – Baumgartner's xylographic recreation with its laborious reworking of the image surface also makes manifest the density of photographic image. Its detail, its sheer informative excess has been commented upon by writers from Fox Talbot onwards. Baumgartner's lines complicate the transparency associated with photography's factual detail and precision. While her images undeniably maintain a 'photographic' look, including aspects of tone and depth, by the means explained above, their insistent linearity also unpicks and defamiliarises the standard photograph's seemingly obvious factual details. Thus, by implication, they are exposed as the result of technical intervention and convention.

As analogue (im)prints, Baumgartner's images enact a complex interplay of presence and absence, as proposed by Didi-Huberman, in the sense that any analogue print does, that is through the absence of the matrix in the final image.[24] However, more importantly, uniquely even, her striations – frequently interpreted in analogy to the binary 0/1 of digital code (Coldwell, n.p.) – can be read as incorporating, even foregrounding, presence

and absence as a general feature of the imprint into the actual structure of the individual work. If the white lines are indicative of the absence or loss of contact of the final object (print) with its matrix (or origin), then the black lines are proof of presence, of the contact of the imprint with its origin, the matrix. Similarly, the other features of Didi-Huberman's dialectical characterisation of the imprint, as indicated, are performatively put into play by Baumgartner's method: the potential for reproduction that is inherent in the imprint – due to its reliance on and operation of the matrix – can be said to occur in the image's seemingly repeat lines. However, instead of mere repetition, each line is unique. Furthermore, as well as each being dissimilar to the matrix – by being reversed in the print version – each line also resembles it. Finally, the linear structure exhibits the alternation between 'form' and 'formlessness', the 'familiar' and the 'strange' of the imprint, concepts which are often culturally apprehended in terms of a binary opposition, as argued earlier. Each of Baumgartner's prints can therefore be regarded as a dialectical image in Didi-Huberman's sense: it presents the viewer with 'an explosion' of these qualities.

As with Andrew, the prints' material (de)construction in the viewing process – their 'aesthetic speculation' (Joselit), as just described – results in a certain 'unease'. Furthermore, proprio-kinetic properties that are frequently at odds with the images' subject matter are re-instilled. Through these processes, the viewer is enabled to reflect on 'the shapes of social [and technological] governance' (Joselit 168) to which the images allude, including the technologies and their typical visual signifiers – as with photography – that conventionally transmit them.

Conclusion

I hope to have shown how the woodcuts of each of the two artists adopt a unique approach that has been related to French art historian Didi-Huberman's concept of the 'imprint' as an image or object that is premised on the direct physical contact of one material substance or object with another. In transposing a – black and white – photographic image into a woodcut the photograph is re-fashioned as an imprint. It has been argued that the latter's dialectical qualities – between authenticity and presence on the one hand and absence and loss on the other; between original and reproduction; resemblance and dissimilarity; sameness and difference; form and formlessness; familiarity and strangeness – serve to undermine the unproblematic transparency that is still often associated with the photograph – and that today is enhanced by its digitised ubiquity and speed of transmission.

The close matching of the visual codes of Andrew's woodcuts to photographic ones in combination with the woodcut's status as an imprint results in the aforementioned dialectical qualities, thus never allowing the viewer to settle into an unquestioned familiarity with what the image is of. Moreover, Andrew's woodcuts allow – or force – the viewer to recognise and experience – by proxy – (some of) the labour that underlies their making, through the physical effort that is prompted by the images' complex fabrication. Thus they render the specific import of his iconographic focus with its overt critique tangible.

Baumgartner's conspicuous structural patterns spectacularly defamiliarise the conventional codes of the photographic image at the same time as maintaining them, albeit obliquely. Even more than Andrew's prints, their striated configuration can be said to embody the dialectics of the imprint in the images' very make-up.

The approach of these contemporary artists to the photographic image through the ancient technique of the woodcut leads to the 'slowing down', not just of the process of the creation of the image, it also results in a 'plasticity' of the photograph that affects the prints' encounter with the viewer. The viewing process itself is decelerated. This allows for the photographic image to be revealed in its socio-cultural constructedness; permitting, maybe even demanding – in conjunction with the artists' thematic focus – a critical reflection on its role in the visual economy of contemporary society and culture.

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[1] One example of the burgeoning literature and exhibition activities on the subject is the excellently contextualised catalogue of the 2012 exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg *The Art of Deceleration. Motion and Rest in Art from Caspar David Friedrich to Ai Wei Wei,* edited by Markus Brüderlin.

[2] Unlike this focus on materiality, other authors, like Sarah James, have argued for a re-examination of photography's privileged relationship to the 'real' in the form of documentary as a critical response to the predominance of digital images' seemingly straightforward proximity to the real (1-4). The opposite approach is suggested by,

amongst others, Philippe Dubois, namely the conception of the photograph as a 'fiction-image' (155-66).

[3] In examining the interrelationship between photography and printmaking in 19th century France, Stephen Bann lays the blame on the disavowal of photography's enmeshment with printmaking during the 19th century on writers such as Gernsheim who in his 1955 *History of Photography* clearly strove to 'avoid contaminating photography with the vocabulary proper to the engraving arts' quite unlike the practitioners of the 19th century themselves ("Photography, Printmaking" 24). Bann also points out that 'Benjamin's view of visual reproduction in the 19th century is vitiated by the need to arrange successive "inventions" diachronically, with the photograph being cast as the ultimate fulfilment of the project of mimesis' (*ibid*). In other words, there has been a general tendency in writing on photography – notwithstanding the important work by a number of scholars, such as Bann - to ignore or deny its historical affiliation with printmaking. The reasons for this 'blind spot' lie – as indicated in Bann's comments – in the desire or perceived need to construct a (singular) medium-specific genealogy of photography. See also Bann, "Distinguished Images" and Bann "Parallel Lines"; Rosen "The Printed Photograph" and Rosen "Julia Margaret".

[4] The same can be said of critical discourses assessing these practices. While painting, video, film and installation are frequent reference points in photography criticism, printmaking rarely gets a mention. See, for example, David Campany's comment: 'It's interesting that historically photography has always emerged as the crucial medium in discussions not just about reproduction and originality, but also about authorship,

anonymity, authenticity, agency, the status of the document, quotation, appropriation, value, democracy, dissemination and so forth. It's the medium that prompted art to rethink what's at stake in those concepts, but has also proved to be the medium best placed to articulate and express them too' (Campany 83). Interestingly, José Roca, curator of the significant international print exhibition *Philagrafika* (2009-10) in Philadelphia, USA, counts similar qualities of contemporary art as a whole, namely 'seriality, multiplicity, and dissemination' as typical of print ("The Graphic Unconscious" 23). The fusions of other media with photography that have piqued the interest of theorists, critics and artists themselves have tended to be painting or cinema rather than print/printmaking. For a recent example, see British philosopher Gregory Currie's lecture "The Visible Surface: Painting, Photography, Cinema". Scottish Aesthetics Forum, Edinburgh, 11 December 2015.

A recent exception, other than historical and/or technical investigations, is philosopher Christy Mag Uidhir's "Photographic art: An ontology fit to print".

[5] For just one example, see the works from the *Impressions from South Africa* exhibition at MOMA, New York, 2011. The MOMA exhibition webpages highlight artists using photography.

[6] I am not suggesting that such self-reflexivity is novel. See the examples by the earliest photographers such as Bayard, Foucault and Fox Talbot mentioned by Batchen ("Photography" 50-56).

[7] On the difficulty of translating the term *empreinte* into English in the context of Didi-Huberman's study and the retention of the French term, see translator Miranda Stewart's

note in the first English translation of the initial section of Didi-Huberman's book, titled "Ouverture", in my forthcoming anthology of critical writing on print: 'The word *empreinte*, the subject of Didi-Huberman's book, can mean variously 'print', 'imprint', 'impression', 'trace' or 'mark'. … There is no single English term that encompasses the denotative range of the French word *empreinte* in terms of the material objects it covers, or its potential metaphorical connotations. Hence the translation retains the original French *empreinte'* (Pelzer-Montada, 2018).

Quotations from the untranslated sections of the book are my own translation from the German edition (Didi-Huberman "Ähnlichkeit").

[8] Didi-Huberman's study was originally published in 1997 under the title *L'Empreinte*, to accompany his eponymous exhibition. Didi-Huberman stresses that the imprint in the age of mechanical reproduction is different from earlier manifestations. One can extend this observation to the notion of the imprint in the age of digital reproduction. This is a subject that would benefit from further investigation. Although written before the widespread advent of the digital in art, Didi-Huberman released an unaltered version of his text in 2008, obviously still deeming his earlier insights relevant.

[9] The French word 'contact' has been retained in the English translation, as it has fewer, immediately valorising connotations than the word 'touch'.

[10] Hence the term's usefulness in querying long-held (art-historical, and often cultural, one may add) binary assumptions associated with art in general. Didi-Huberman is scathing about the reasons for the neglect of the imprint/cast in art history. For a humanist art history (Didi-Huberman cites Jean Clair) it smacks too much of crude

materiality; being too 'real', too simplistic, rudimentary, even 'primitive' in its execution, lacking in skill and premeditated thought or 'idea'. Postmodern authors (Didi-Huberman cites Rosalind Krauss) may be predisposed towards the imprint for its seeming evacuation of presence, authenticity and originality, its 'arbitrariness', but they underestimate its complexity, especially its potential to challenge binary thinking that still structures much art historical discourses (such as colour/drawing; nature/ideal; organic forms/geometry; ornament/structure; image/text ("Ähnlichkeit und Berührung" 196/7) and the index and icon (26). Didi-Huberman's larger project is to argue for the fundamental role of the imprint within a general theory of the image. The imprint then is seen as the necessary counterpart to imitation, just as the haptic and the optical are necessary counterparts, not oppositions (36).

[11] See, for example, Elkins, especially the combative exchange between Rosalind Krauss (125-7 and 339-42) and Joel Snyder (369-400).

[12] As, for example, in Sontag's well-known phrase of the photograph as 'something directly stencilled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask' (80-1). Discussions about the index, including the use of the term 'imprint', have contributed to a more complex, even if unresolved understanding of the photograph's indexical relationship to its referent. See Elkins, especially 27 and 147.

[13] In order not to overcomplicate the argument here I am ignoring further possible transfer or imprinting processes, such as transferring an original drawing onto the plate or stone by means of charcoal, for example.

[14] Increasingly artists use laser-cutting for this purpose – see the woodcuts of Korean artist Jimin Lee, for example. See also Catanese, 2012.

[15] For information on Japanese woodblock or *mokuhanga*, see Salter.

[16] Andrew was unable to obtain any information on the sources of the images. Email to author, 22 June 2015.

[17] See also Andrew and Walter, 2-6.

[18] The author saw the print series in 2011 in the campus gallery of Monash University in Melbourne.

[19] For a detail of Gertsch's cutting technique see: http://www.artnet.com/artists/franz-gertsch/schwarzwasser-i-detail-8-schwarz-a-a80BDbmQD0s7rU3Ia3qb-w2

[20] On the notion of optical versus haptic vision in recent printmaking, see Pelzer-Montada (2008), especially 80-88.

[21] 'I used various types of *bokashi*. *Bokashi* is a gradation of color technique. The *bokashi* techniques I used include *atenashi bokashi* (shadow portions) and *ita bokashi* (block gradation) for the rug in *Even a Failing Mind feels the Tug of History* and in *Legions of War Widows Face Dire Need in Iraq* around the fireplace stones' (Shoichi Kitamura in: Pelzer-Montada, "Brook Andrew" 416). For further explanations about techniques of block cutting and printing and their respective effects, see Salter 98–110.

[22] See also some of the details: The two woodblock images required six to seven blocks which were carved on both sides. 35 to 38 trial impressions were counted by Andrew and Walter. Kitamura reckons he printed each woodblock, which can carry several image elements, three to four times, so the figures given by Andrew and Walter and Kitamura

himself roughly correspond. (Email correspondences with Andrew, 19 June 2015; and Kitamura, 22 June 2015, respectively.) It is worth pointing out that these monochrome images required many more impressions than even a complex traditional Japanese colour woodblock, which on average would consist of up to twenty blocks, one for each colour ("Heilbrunn Timeline").

[23] These features of Baumgartner's work could be linked to the 'machine vision' of the camera, as theorised by Vilém Flusser.

[24] It is important to remember that, following Marcel Mauss, Didi-Huberman emphasises that any 'technical dispositif' (or technical apparatus) quite independently of its technical sophistication – or lack thereof – has to be conceived in terms of a subtle tension between its material and symbolic effects and effectiveness: its physical structure only exists in connection with its linguistic or verbal structure ("Ähnlichkeit und Berührung" 16).

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